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ABSTRACT

Using a pilot version of an instrument designed to probe perceptions of undergraduates in areas related to teaching as a profession and the desirability of teacher education programs, this study begins to develop a base upon which to formulate strategies for understanding and dealing with declining enrollment in teacher education programs. A branching questionnaire, which asked subjects to respond only in those areas relevant to their own experience, was sent to a sample of students enrolled at the State University of New York College at Potsdam. The data indicate that: (1) perceptions of the actual conditions within the teaching profession do not seem to act as strong determiners in career decisions; (2) subjects do not seem concerned with salary, career status, safety, and the nature of the client; (3) teacher education programs are perceived as highly vocationally oriented and useful only in obtaining positions in the teaching profession; and (4) students may be forming their perceptions from informal and not completely accurate sources. The results tentatively suggest two strategies for dealing with declining enrollment: (1) altering students' perceptions in relation to the employment outlook of college graduates so that it is more in tune with reality; and (2) making undergraduates more aware of the possibilities of education as a profession. (A sample questionnaire is included). (MM)

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A STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE STATUS OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION IN DETERMINING STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH DECLINING ENROLLMENT IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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I. Introduction and Rationale

Declining enrollments in schools and colleges of education nationwide is a noticeable trend even to the casual observer. This phenomenon has been commented upon in popular and professional publication and has been the subject of endless discussion both within and outside the profession.

This situation is of particular concern to the administration and faculty of institutions and divisions of institutions whose primary focus has traditionally been the professional preparation of teachers. The State University of New York, College of Arts and Sciences at Potsdam is such an institution. Founded as an academy to train teachers for local schools in 1816 it developed to become Potsdam Normal School in 1866 and grow to a four year teachers college by 1912. In 1948 it became a campus of the newly formed State University of New York and in 1962 began offering programs leading to the B.A. in liberal arts areas. During this entire period, however, teacher education was its largest program and the college was known primarily as a teacher training institution.

In 1970 forty-four percent of students receiving the Bachelor's degree from State University College at Potsdam had earned teacher certification in elementary education. By 1976 this proportion had dropped to thirteen percent. This trend is noticeable in the State University of New York as a whole. During the 1971-72 academic year 12,078 certificates to teach were awarded to students graduating from SUNY units. By the 1975-76 academic year this number was 9,924; a decrease of almost eighteen percent (SUNY Office of Institutional Research, 1976).

While a number of theories and ideas have been advanced to explain this decline, all of these appear to be flawed in some aspect. Among the explanations commonly given to explain decreased enrollments in teacher education programs are the following:

1) Decreasing job opportunities. The past five years has shown placement rates drop from virtually 100% placement to a point where SUCP's 56% placement rate for the Class of 1974 graduates holding the N-6 certificate places first among the units of the State University and the 51% placement rate for holders of secondary certificates places second.

2) General declining enrollments in colleges throughout the nation due to economic conditions and the passing of the post-World War II "baby boom" students from the undergraduate scene.

3) Lack of interest in education as an occupation due to deteriorating conditions in schools and the lack of public support and respect for educators.

4) Unwillingness of students to take education courses due to the fact that these courses are uninteresting, unstimulating, and/or difficult to schedule.

Each of these hypotheses are logically difficult to support in the light of what information is available. While employment opportunities are lower in education than at any time since World War II, they are better than in any of the liberal arts and non-liberal arts areas available at SUCP with the exception of Computer Science. In fact, if the graduates of the Computer Science program were partialed out, students graduating with certificates to teach have better than twice the chance of finding employment in the area of their choice than do graduates who do not hold teacher certificates. Further, at SUCP, students must all earn the B.A. degree (with the exception of certain students at Crane School of Music) in a liberal arts major. Teacher certification is accomplished by investing 18 to 30 semester hours from among the 30 semester hours of free electives that all students earning a degree in liberal arts must earn. Thus, working toward a certificate does not preclude earning a liberal arts degree. From a probabilistic standpoint, if the probabilities of obtaining employment in education and in a non-education position are independent (and they should be since employment in education requires a certificate) the union of these two sets of events should be equal to the sum of the probabilities. If students are really as vocationally oriented as the exponents of this hypothesis would have us believe, they should realize that being certified to teach (at SUCP at any rate) would increase their chances of being employed in a professional capacity. This is true for the State University of New York as a whole where 42% of the people awarded certificates to teach during the 1974-75 academic year were employed in education in the Fall of 1975 (SUNY Office of Institutional Research, 1976). Further evidence of the relative advantages in employability of certified persons nationwide is presented by DeWitt & Tussing (1971), Zerfoss and Shapiro (1972) and Ward (1975).

Enrollment in the State University of New York and at SUCP is generally increasing and can be expected to continue to increase given the information available as of this writing (University of the State of New York, 1973). The population of the United States and of New York State is increasing (although in the case of New York State this increase is at a rate that is below that of

many other states and that rate traditionally enjoyed by New York) (Barabba, 1976). While these projections and others like them are chancey due to the inability of demographers to take unexpected developments into consideration in their calculations, even at zero population growth the population of the United States should continue to grow until about the year 2000 after which a stabilizing effect should set in. In fact, the United States has not attained zero population growth nor are we likely to for a long time. In 1975 the population of the United States increased by 1.7 million. During this same year it was found that women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four years expected to have an average of 2.2 children during their lifetimes while women thirty-five to thirty-nine years old expected to have an average of 3.1 children. Both figures are above the replacement level (i.e. ZPG) of 2.1 children per woman (Barabba, 1976).

In fact, college enrollment is increasing. The increasing cost of private post-secondary education is driving more and more students to public colleges, as well. The State University of New York has placed ceilings on enrollments at most units of the University. This trend continues in New York State in spite of the Tuition Assistance Program (TAPS) which was designed to aid students attending private institutions of higher education.

The argument of deteriorating working conditions may have some merit. The increase in school violence and class size has been well documented by the media. Further, prospective preservice teachers are within a year or two of being high school students themselves and have probably observed some of these conditions first hand. Many may have been discouraged from entering the profession by teachers and parents. Since many preservice teachers come from families where one or both parents are members of the profession, there may be a double influence here. Regardless of where this information comes from, it is possible that such information is keeping prospective teachers out of the profession.

There is little doubt that the teaching profession has suffered from a decrease in prestige and public respect. Whether this is due to the rise of trade unionism, as some suspect, or whether it is due to such factors as public resentment at the cost of education, changing attitudes as to the value of education, or present economic conditions, or any one of a host of other factors is not at all clear. What is clear, however, is that school financial propositions are being defeated by voters more and more frequently and that public opinion polls consistently

show teaching as a less respected profession than previously indicated.

On the other hand, teachers have shown tremendous strides in terms of direct compensation and fringe benefits with mean salaries increasing by about 50 percent from 1970 to 1975 (World Almanac, 1976). Teachers have also made tremendous advances in terms of job security and hiring and dismissal procedures during this time. While the present economic situation has resulted in the suspension of some of these advances, the strides made are still considerable.

Little data is available as to student perceptions of education courses. Previous data has indicated that many students have felt these courses to be less relevant to the needs of preservice professional than they should be. Common feeling has been that preservice preparation should include more work in the field in real school situations. The advent of Competency Based Teacher Education in New York State has brought about a mandated increase in the field-centeredness of preservice programs at the N-6 and N-9 levels. While it may be too early to tell what effect this will have there appears at the present time to be no increase in enrollment in these programs due to this increase in field work.

The field-centered nature of these new programs require students to block out periods of time in which to work in the field. Since this must occur during periods that public schools are in session it could be that students are encountering scheduling problems. These times have traditionally been prime times for the scheduling of liberal arts courses. In the past this has not been a subject of concern since student teaching, the only time of traditional field work has been a full time activity. The increase in field work requires students to be taking liberal arts courses during the same semesters that they are doing field work in the schools. On the other hand, students have long had to block periods of time for laboratories and studio courses and have done so with no insurmountable difficulties.

It is evident that the informal hypotheses stated above fall into two categories. The decreasing market for teachers, declining college enrollments and conditions within public education are phenomena which occur outside institutions of teacher education and over which teacher educators have little or no control. On the other hand, the quality of teacher education programs and the practical difficulties of students' participating in these programs occur within teacher education institutions and can be directly changed by teacher educators. If these latter situations are the reasons for decreasing enrollments solutions should

be relatively simple. All that would be required would be to change programs so that they would be conceived as stimulating and worthwhile. While this is no mean task it could be accomplished by changes within the institution.

However, if students are found to be avoiding teacher education programs because of phenomena that are outside of the institutions of teacher education, and if teacher educators feel it is desirable to attract more students in spite of these phenomena, strategies for reversing enrollment declines would be very different. In order to make decisions about strategies for dealing with the declining enrollment in teacher education programs decision makers must have a clear idea of the factors influencing this decline.

Combs and Snygg (1959), and Patterson (1973) among others, point out that people behave according to their perceptions of reality rather than to reality itself. This phenomenological outlook suggests a research strategy different from those previously used. Where previous researchers have looked at statistics dealing with placement rates, population trends, numbers of jobs available, salary figures, and descriptions of conditions in schools and assumed that prospective teacher education students used this information in making career decisions, no study has attempted to probe students perceptions of this data. There is no certainty that students perceive this data as discouraging in terms of entering teacher preparation programs. In fact there is no certainty that students are even aware of much of this data.

This study was an attempt to devise an instrument for probing student perceptions of the state of the teaching profession in terms of job probabilities, desirability of teaching as a profession, and the desirability of teacher education programs. The instrument used was a pilot version and the authors make no claims in terms of the reliability or face validity of the results. Nevertheless, the results obtained seem to support the feasibility of using more refined instruments for probing student perceptions in making decisions about dealing with declining enrollments in teacher education programs.

II. The Instrument

The need for a questionnaire that was as brief and easy to answer as possible in order to encourage a high response rate was evident from the beginning of this survey. On the other hand, it was important to be able to probe student perceptions as completely as possible. As a result, it was decided to attempt to collect

only the specific information that faculty and administrative needs specifically called for. While it was realized that this meant that there was a great deal of information that might have been of some interest and would have lead to a more complete probe of perception that could not be collected, the researchers decided that it would be better to sacrifice breadth for the sake of depth, at least in this initial survey. Accordingly, a branching type of questionnaire was used which asked subjects to respond only in those areas in which they themselves expressed concern. For instance, a student who indicated that he was only concerned about the status and financial aspects of teaching as a profession was only asked to comment on this and not about the availability of jobs or the difficulty of scheduling education courses.

The questionnaire was sent to a sample of students with a cover letter from the Dean of the School of Education soliciting their help in gathering information for School of Education program planning. Students were requested to complete the questionnaire anonymously and return it in the postage paid envelope provided as soon as possible.

The first section of the questionnaire requested demographic information: college class, sex, academic major, and whether or not the student was presently engaged in a teacher education program at SUCP. Students who were not engaged in teacher education were told to skip the rest of this section while those who were were asked to identify the program they were in, to describe what factors led them into teacher training and to indicate if there was anything that almost made them decide not to enter. At this point they were thanked for their time and asked to return the questionnaire.

Students who identified themselves as not being enrolled in a program leading to certification were asked to indicate the number of credit hours of education courses they had already taken if any. Then, they were asked to indicate what, if anything, they had heard of the new competency based teacher education courses and to briefly summarize their impressions of CBTE.

Students were then asked to indicate what factors influenced their decisions not to begin a teacher training program by checking one or more of the following possibilities:

A) It is too early in my program to enter teacher training.

B) I don't want to be a teacher.

C) There are not enough jobs for new teachers.

D) Education courses are less interesting than other electives.

E) Teacher training courses are hard to fit into my schedule.

At this point subjects were asked to amplify their responses by completing questions relevant only to the reasons they indicated for not going into teacher education programs.

Subjects choosing A (too early) were asked if they had inquired of the School of Education when they could start a teacher education program.

Subjects choosing B (don't want to be a teacher) were asked to indicate the reason for this from among:

1) I have another career in mind.
2) It never occurred to me.
3) Teachers don't get enough money/respect.
4) Schools are not pleasant places in which to work.
5) I don't think I would like working with children.
6) Other

Subjects who chose C (not enough jobs) were asked to indicate their sources of information regarding this perception from among:

1) Family members
2) Public school teachers
3) Fellow college students
4) College faculty or staff
5) General gossip
6) Published statistics
7) Other

They were then asked to estimate the proportion of SUCP graduates holding teacher certification who obtained jobs upon leaving SUCP and the proportion of graduates not holding teacher certification who did so.

Subjects who chose D (education courses uninteresting) were asked to indicate the source of this perception from among:

1) personal experiences
2) public school teachers
3) other students at SUCP
4) SUCP faculty or staff

Subjects who chose E (scheduling problems) were asked to identify the source of these probelms from among:

1) Teacher training courses are offered at the same times as required courses in Liberal Studies.
2) Some teacher training programs require pairs of courses to be taken concurrently, making scheduling difficult.
3) Teacher training courses require a larger number of hours to be scheduled than other courses of similar credit value.

4) Other

Finally, subjects were asked to comment on other factors which they believed influenced students to enter or not to enter teacher training programs.

Subjects were thanked for their cooperation and requested to return the questionnaire in the postage paid envelope provided.

III. Objective Characteristics of the Sample

From the approximately 4700 students enrolled at the college in the Spring of 1976, a selection of 500 neames was drawn at random by the Computer Services Office. The questionnaire was mailed to each of the 500 at his/her current residence and responses were received by campus mail over the following 21 days.

Altogether 55.8% of the selected students responded. (N = 279) This raises the question whether the responding 270 were different in important ways from the 221 non-respondents or from the 4700 in the total college population.

Comparison of the respondents to the total student body with respect to class is shown in Table 1. A Chi-squared test did not show significant class bias in the sample at the .05 level of confidence.

TABLE 1

Class	# in College	# of Respondents
Freshmen	1046	72
Sophomores	984	71
Juniors	825	43
Seniors	962	60
Graduate Students	866	33

Comparison of the respondents to the total student body with respect to academic major, however, did reveal a significant bias at the .02 level of confidence. This relationship is shown in Table 2 with no hypothesis ventured. (It is important to know that at this college education students have a liberal arts major in addition to their training in education.)

TABLE 2

Major	# in College	# Responding	Sample %
Computer Science	378	26	6.9
Foreign Language	78	6	13.0
History	129	21	16.2
Humanities	424	35	8.3
Mathematics	251	22	8.8
Music	564	34	6.0
Natural Science	432	36	8.3
Psychology	434	27	6.2
Social Science	391	29	7.4
Uncommitted	619	42	6.8

There was also found a bias such that females were more likely to respond than males ($p < .01$).

The biases found in the sample with respect to sex and academic major suggest that processes may have been at work which would also bias our findings with regard to students; thinking about the teacher training program. By the nature of the design we cannot know for sure.

The bias with regard to enrollment in teacher education programs is irrelevant here because the remainder of this report focuses exclusively upon students who were not currently enrolled in any teacher education program.

IV. Non-Education Students' Reasons for Not Entering Teacher Preparation

The key question, upon which the branching in the remainder of the questionnaire is based, asks the non-education student which one(s) among five broad "factors" have had significant effect upon his/her decision not to enter teacher preparation. Table 3 lists the options and the number of respondents who chose each one. The total number of reasons given (265) is greater than the number of respondents to this item (158) because the question allows a respondent to identify more than one of the five reasons as having been "significant."

TABLE 3

Reason	N	(Rounded) % of Respondents
It is too early in my college program to enter teacher training	27	17
I don't want to be a teacher	120	76
There are not enough jobs for new teachers	88	56
Education courses are less interesting than other electives	19	12
Teacher training courses are hard to fit into my schedule	11	7

In retrospect the authors have felt that the second option, "I don't want to be a teacher.", should have been worded differently in order to mak it more clearly an alternative to the others. Some wording such as "I woul like to be employed as a teacher," might have narrowed the scope and consequently reduced the number of responses in that category. Nevertheless, ou findings are in agreement with the historical finding by Lortie (1975) that the teaching profession has traditionally made the desire to teach to be th principal criterion for entry. Thus, those who are not going to be teacher are outside the profession principally because they do not wish to enter.

A close second, however, in importance is the employment outlook for n teachers. More than half of the non-education students at Potsdam indicate that their perception of the employment outlook is a significant factor in their not entering teacher preparation.

The other three options offered to students, which were included to as the importance of college-controlled barriers to students, were clearly of importance than the Big Two: not wanting to be a teacher, and fearing the employment outlook. The fact that college seems to suggest that schools of education may be able to do relatively little to reverse the decline of enrollments. Possible "outs" from this fatalistic position, however, are suggested by the more detailed examination of students' phenomenological wo

under the separate sections below.

A. Breakdown: "Too early to begin."

Respondents who indicated that it was too early in their college programs to enroll in teacher training courses were, in general, correct. Table 4 shows their distribution by class.

TABLE 4

Class	N	(Rounded) % of Class Among Respondents
Freshman	21	38
Sophomore	5	14
Junior	1	4
Senior	0	0

Generally at this college students are discouraged by the faculty from beginning teacher training courses during their Freshman year and are told that entering in the Sophomore year is strictly optional. The beginning of Junior year is considered by the faculty to be an appropriate time to begin education course work. Thus, student responses to this item would be considered appropriate by the faculty. It is not clear how the students arrived at their conclusions, however, because only 8 of the 28 students who felt it was "too early" reported actually having inquired at the School of Education as to when would be an appropriate time.

B. Breakdown: "Don't Want to be a Teacher."

Students who checked that they "don't want to be a teacher" were not significantly different from other respondents with respect to sex but did differ with respect to liberal arts major ($p < .01$).

TABLE 5

Majors of Students Who "Don't Want to Teach"

Major	N	% of Major in Sample
Computer Science	23	92.0
Foreign Language	1	33.3
History	6	75.0
Humanities	16	69.6
Mathematics	7	70.0
Natural Science	20	83.3
Psychology	17	89.5
Social Science (ex.Psy.)	14	82.4
Uncommitted	15	53.6

These differences, though significant, are not easy to interpret. The 33% in Foreign Language should be disregarded because of the small N. The "Uncommitted" student who is not in teacher education programs has not necessarily made up his mind enough to be able to say whether he does or does not want to teach. For the computer science student, on the other end of the spectrum, it is not hard to imagine that his reluctance to enter the teaching profession has something to do with his alternative career plans. (see Table 6).

TABLE 6

Reasons Given by Respondents for Not Wanting to be Teachers

Reason	N	% Checking each reason
I have another career in mind	102	85.0
It never occurred to me	52	44.1
Teachers don't get enough money/respect	19	15.8
Schools are not pleasant places in which to work.	12	10.0
I wouldn't like working with children	21	17.5
Other	32	26.7

(Cross-tabulation of each of the reasons given in Table 6 with the majors listed in Table 5 shows a significant Chi-squared ($p < .025$) relationship of majors only with having another career in mind. Having another career in mind is relatively less significant for the uncommitted, the social science, and the humanities majors.)

C. Breakdown: "Not enough jobs for new teachers."

The 56% who felt there were not enough jobs for new teachers did not differ significantly from the other 44% with regard to sex or major. When asked what their sources of information were (to the effect that there are few jobs for teachers) the students checked the following:

TABLE 7

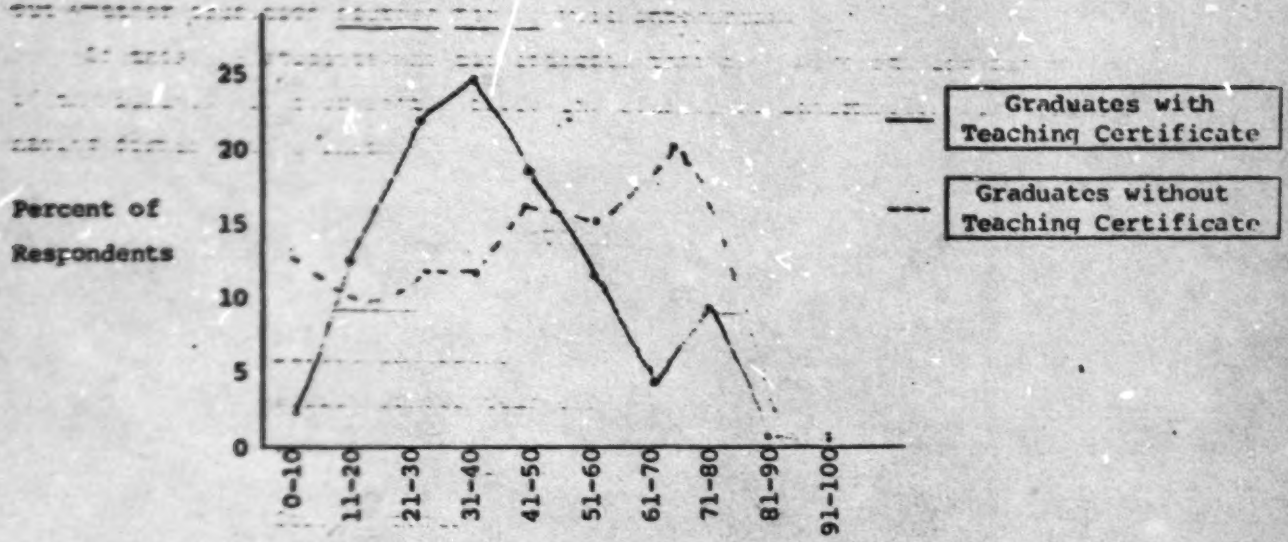
Source	N	% Naming Source
Family members	49	55.1
Public school teachers	44	50.0
Fellow college students	55	62.5
College faculty/staff	24	27.0
"General gossip"	61	69.3
Published statistics	53	60.2
Other	22	25.3

The striking thing about this table is that the consensus on the poor employment market for teachers is so widespread except among faculty and staff of the college. This could mean either that students don't talk to faculty about the employment market or that the faculty are not joining the public consensus in telling students the negative news. Either meaning would call for further investigation.

A somewhat unusual feature of this college is that each student who graduates with teaching certification also graduates with the same Bachelor of Arts degree as non-education students. Logically one would expect, therefore, that employment prospects would be at least somewhat brighter for graduates with teaching certification than for those without. Data supplied by the college Career Services office bear this out. Among uncertified graduates from Potsdam in the class of 1975 whose employment status was known to the college, 35% had found employment by February of the year following graduation. The comparable figure for graduates with elementary or secondary teaching certificates was 47%. Yet when asked to estimate the percent of graduates finding employment immediately after graduation, these respondents gave lower chances to the student with certification than the student without.

FIGURE 1

Student Estimates of Percent of Potsdam Graduates Finding Immediate Employment



The modal estimates of immediate employment chances are 61-70% for the graduate without teaching certification and only 31-40% for the graduate with teaching certification. This by itself is contrary to the facts and to "common sense." Further inspection of the figure shows that there is much greater consensus among students on the (low) employment prospects of graduates with teaching certification, as indicated by the smaller variances. Students' estimates of immediate employment prospects without certification are fairly evenly distributed over the range of 0% to 80%. The authors' favorite hypotheses to account for these distributions are that: (1) Students at Potsdam are responding to national rather than local employment prospects for new teachers. (2) Students do not think about the possibility of a person with teaching certification taking a non-teaching job. (3) Students are not getting very much data on the employment prospects of new college graduates other than teachers. Each of these hypotheses could be the basis of an "educational" effort designed to correct the students' perception of the employment outlook.

D. Breakdown: "Uninteresting Education Courses."

Only 19 non-education students (12%) indicated that the courses themselves were turning them off to teaching. An earlier item had already established that less than a quarter of non-education students had ever taken any education courses so it is not clear that respondents had had the opportunity to find out whether education courses per se were interesting.

Of those 19 students who did indicate that they were staying out because of the dullness of courses the following sources of information were cited as having formed that opinion:

TABLE 8

Source	N
Direct experience	7
Public school teachers	2
Education students at Potsdam	18
College faculty here	3
Family/friends/public	10

E. Breakdown: "Teacher Taining courses difficult to schedule."

Only 11 students (7%) indicated they were being kept away because of difficulty in fitting the necessary courses into their schedule. Their difficulties are broken down in Table 9.

TABLE 9

Difficulty	N
Conflict with a required Liberal Studies course	5
Some teacher training programs require scheduling a pair of courses in the same semester.	2
Teacher training courses require a larger number of hours of classroom time than other courses	4
Other	7

IV. Conclusions

The lack of documentation of the instrument as well as the limited nature of the sample does not allow for the formulation of definite generalizations in terms of specific recommendations in dealing with the present enrollment picture in teacher preparation institutions. However, some interesting possibilities for further study can be found in the data obtained.

Perceptions of the actual conditions within the profession do not seem to act as strong determiners in career decisions of undergraduates in this sample. Subjects do not seem concerned with salary, career status, safety, and the nature of the client (i.e. children), all of which have received at least as much attention in the media suggested in Table 7 as the employment picture.

It would appear that this group of undergraduates perceive teacher education programs as highly vocationally oriented and useful only in actually obtaining positions in the teaching profession. This is an interesting perception in light of the nature of the program at Potsdam which requires students to earn a B.A. degree in one of the liberal arts departments.

It seems apparent that students maybe forming their perceptions from informal, and not too accurate sources. The data shown in Figure 1 is not only illogical but inaccurate either on a local or national basis.

The results of this study tentatively suggest at least two strategies for attempting to deal with declining enrollments. Since students did not seem to be concerned with the nature of the teacher preparation program itself, attempts to change the structure of these programs (e.g. more field based/less field based, more concentrated in time/less concentrated in time) may prove to be ineffective. The types of student perceptions which influence career decisions appear to deal with things outside of the institutions of teacher education and outside of the schools in which teachers work. This data suggests an attempt at altering students' perceptions in relation to the employment outlook of college graduates in general so that it is more in tune with reality and making undergraduates and potential undergraduates more aware of the possibilities of education as a profession. The authors strongly suggest that further research be conducted to see if the results obtained here are generalizable to the general population of undergraduates and to refine instruments to the point that they can reliably probe those perceptions

which are affecting undergraudates' career decisions, particularly as they pertain to entering the field of education.

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